C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000731

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAQ 201: SHI'A POLITICAL LANDSCAPE COLORED BY
INTERNAL RIVALRY

REF: A. BAGHDAD 000387
     ¶B. BAGHDAD 000588
     ¶C. BAGHDAD 000401
     ¶D. BAGHDAD 000570

Classified By: PMIN Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. This cable outlines Iraq's primary Shi'a
parties and the major events Shi'a actors will likely face
before national elections, planned for late 2009 or early
¶2010. Prime Minister Maliki's Da'wa party, and the other
Shi'a who won seats during the January 31 provincial
elections now face the challenges of governing effectively
and transferring their provincial success to national
elections. Da'wa's principal Shi'a rival, the Islamic
Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), must now look at how to
preserve its partnership with the Kurds and the Sunni Iraqi
Islamic Party (IIP), while adjusting its image among Shi'a
voters. All sides have largely accepted the election results
and since mid-2008 have halted anti-state violence. The
major events in Shi'a politics this year will be the seating
of new provincial governments, intra-Shi'a battles in
parliament, Sadrists reconciliation talks, and coalition
formation for national elections. End summary.

The Primary Shi'a Parties

¶2. (C) The results of the January 31 provincial elections
offers a snapshot of the Shi'a political landscape (ref A):
Da'wa, Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and the
Sadrists remain the top-tier Shi'a trends, coming in first
through third in Shi'a dominated areas. The second-tier
parties -- Reform Trend, Iraqi National List, and Fadhila --
will struggle to gain prominence but could muster enough
support to play kingmaker through coalition-building at the
local or national level.

¶3. (C) DA'WA -- through the "State of Law" Coalition (Note:
this was the name used by the Da'wa coalition in the
provincial elections. End Note) -- includes Da'wa Tanzim and
various independents: Successful largely due to Prime
Minister Maliki's popularity (ref B), Da'wa will attempt to
capitalize on its newfound dominance in southern provincial
councils and Baghdad to transform itself from a party drawing
primarily from the urban elite into a well-organized national
party with a broader support base. Da'wa began in the 1950s
as an intellectual movement and later became a clandestine
body populated by the professional class that resisted Saddam
Hussein's regime through hit-and-run style attacks. Da'wa
was founded by Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr, one of
Iraq most influential clerics of the 20th century and a great
uncle to Muqtada al-Sadr. In 1999, Da'wa split from Da'wa
Tanzim to protest the latter's close links to the Iranian
government. Since 2003, the two have found common ground,
although local competition persists.

¶4. (C) ISCI was founded in 1982 as an exile group by Mohammad
Baqr al-Hakim, who was assassinated in a horrific car bomb

attack at the sacred Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf in August 2003.
 Mohamed Baqr was the brother of ISCI's current leader, Abd
al-Aziz al-Hakim who is himself now dying of cancer. ISCI is
in fact a broad front that includes the "Shahid al-Mihrab"
(Martyr of the Pulpit) coalition of the Badr Organization,
Iraqi Hezbollah, and Sayyid al-Shuhada (Lord of the Martyrs).
 (Note: The Solidarity Bloc affiliates closely with ISCI but
is considered an independent party. End Note). ISCI's
religious credentials and strong organizational apparatus --
which include political entities, former militia, and social
service and religious networks -- helped it come in second in
provincial elections, a showing that displeased ISCI which
Qprovincial elections, a showing that displeased ISCI which
had finished more strongly than Da'wa in 2005 elections.
ISCI's challenges this year will be to utilize its
national-level cooperation with the Kurds and the Sunni Iraqi
Islamic Party (IIP), while rebuilding support among Shi'a
Arabs who have turned toward the more nationalist Maliki (ref
C). It also will likely have to transition leadership of the
front from Abdel Aziz al-Hakim to his son Ammar.

¶5. (C) SADRISTS through the "Tayar al-Ahrar" (Independent
Liberals Trend) list: guided by the absentee but influential
Muqtada al-Sadr, the Sadrists finished a close third to ISCI
in provincial elections, winning seats in every
Shi'a-majority province despite their apparently disorganized
and poorly funded effort. The Sadrists appeal to the Shi'a
urban poor, displaced, and those stridently opposed to the
U.S. presence. Their challenge before national elections
will be to separate themselves from the unpopular violence
and criminality of the Jaysh al-Mahdi and Sadrists' poor
management of public institutions when they were running
central government ministries.

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¶6. (C) REFORM TREND: Led by Former Prime Minister Ibrahim
al-Jafari, a former Da'wa member, the Reform Trend is a
second-tier party that won a handful of seats in nine
provinces. It has two seats in the national parliament. The
Reform Trend has attempted to demonstrate its independence
from PM Maliki but is considering moving toward Da'wa in the
new provincial councils.

¶7. (C) IRAQI NATIONAL LIST: Led by Former Prime Minister Ayad
Allawi, INL is another second-tier party which gained its
strongest support in central Sunni-Shi'a mixed provinces, but
also won seats in several southern provinces. Always seeking
to build bridges between Shi'a and Sunni, Allawi's
domineering leadership style and frequent absence from Iraq
make it difficult for him to find lasting allies. Most, but
not all of the INL members in the national parliament are
secular Shia but so far they have not been able to develop a
strong appeal among Iraqi voters.

¶8. (C) FADHILA (Virtue) Party: Fadhila suffered a major
defeat in provincial elections, especially in its former
stronghold of Basrah, largely due to its poor management of
the province's governorship. Fadhila was created in 2003 as
a Sadrist offshoot by Muhammad al-Yaqubi, a former student of
Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Muqtada's father. Since then,
Fadhila has taken a strong anti-Iran line. To revive its
dying cause, Fadhila probably will have to merge itself with
another Shi'a party. In our experience, the Fadhila
parliamentarians operate in a particularly non-ideological
fashion but angle for and haggle over ministerial and
sub-minister seats and special benefits for their members
like badges more than any other bloc in the parliament.

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Major Events in Shi'a Politics before National
Elections
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¶9. (C) Intra-Shi'a rivalries over policies, power and the
identity of the Iraqi state persist. These tensions, however,

are unlikely to result in significant political paralysis or
backtracking on accommodation before national elections. That
said, this year we expect the following important events,
each laden with pitfalls:

Seating of Provincial Councils

¶10. (C) Seating of new provincial councils, selection of
provincial leadership: The peaceful handover of provincial
government positions from ISCI to Da'wa between mid-March and
early April would demonstrate that Shi'a parties accept
elections as a means to resolve disputes and view Iraq's
political system as legitimate. Almost all Shi'a parties
have publicly labeled the elections fair and credible, with
the exception of the election in Diyala, where Da'wa and
Reform Trend politicians have told Poloffs that Kurdish
parties manipulated votes to the Shi'a's detriment.
(Comment: UNAMI here also acknowledges serious election fraud
committed by Kurdish parties in Diyala. End Comment.) ISCI
complained that Maliki unfairly swayed the election in the
south but say they do not plan to protest.

Fights in Parliament

¶11. (C) Fights in parliament over Maliki, national elections
laws, and the Security Agreement (SA) referendum: Shi'a
parties are likely to take opposing viewpoints over key
issues in parliament before national elections. ISCI
regularly joins with the Sunni IIP and Kurdish Alliance -- a
group of about 125 MPs -- to oppose what they call PM
Maliki's monopolization of power, unfair use of governing
bodies for electoral gain, and aggressive use of security
forces against Sunni and Kurdish rivals. ISCI is likely to
Qforces against Sunni and Kurdish rivals. ISCI is likely to
continue this battle over political parties and national
elections bills -- laws that will influence how political
parties are financed and how ballots are designed, votes
counted, and seats allocated in parliament. In a high-impact
scenario, ISCI and its allies could seek to initiate a
no-confidence vote against Maliki. However, disagreement
about a replacement, the potential blowback for unseating a
popular prime minister, and hope that national elections will
provide a natural end to the Maliki government are likely to
dissuade ISCI from pushing its anti-Maliki strategy that far.

¶12. (C) Sadrist MPs, who loudly opposed the SA in parliament,
might insist on a referendum on the U.S.-Iraq Security
Agreement if they judge highlighting their anti-U.S.
credentials would benefit them before elections. (Note: The
SA passed parliament with a requirement to hold a national

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referendum on the agreement before July 30, 2009. It is
uncertain whether this vote will actually take place on
schedule or at all. End Note.) One danger is that Sadrists,
in conjunction with those attempting to embarrass Maliki,
force a referendum to be held concurrently with the national
election, making the U.S.-Iraq relationship a
prominent election issue.

Maliki-Sadrist Reconciliation

¶13. (C) Outcome of Maliki-Sadrist reconciliation talks:
Maliki and his advisors are holding multi-track
reconciliation talks with Sadrists over detainee releases,
general amnesty of Sadrist-affiliated militias, and, at the
local level, alliances on provincial councils. If these talks
are successful, more Sadrists are likely to accept the
political process. In return for more splinter elements of
the Sadrist Jaysh al-Mahdi militia laying down arms, Maliki
might become less inclined to target Shi'a militia.

Formation of Electoral Coalitions

¶14. (C) National election coalition formation, fate of the
UIA: If Da'wa and ISCI are unable to reunite for national
elections, Da'wa might redouble its efforts to ally with the
Sadrists and Sunni Arab nationalists parties (like the
newly christened National Project, ref D), a partnership that
could force Maliki to accommodate both anti-U.S. and
anti-Kurd sentiments. ISCI and Da'wa are more likely to gloss
over their differences if Shi'a-Sunni sectarian tensions
rise, Grand Ayatollah Sistani urges Shi'a political unity, or
if the two parties successfully negotiate a power-sharing
arrangement before the election.

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